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AUTHOR Dworkin, Sari H.
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ABSTRACT

In this culture a person's sexual identity falls into one of four groups: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and asexual. Essentialism assumes that one is fixed with a core identity of either heterosexual or homosexual. Constructionism posits that categories of sexuality are constructed to meet the needs of a particular culture, society, and/or historical period. Bisexuality as a category is often equated with constructionism. A woman with a bisexual label is seen as a threat to both the lesbian and heterosexual communities. The reasons that bisexual women may choose to identify as lesbian appear to be social, political, and emotional. Socially the lesbian identity offers a community in which to belong. Politically the lesbian identity is a way to continue the struggle against gay and lesbian oppression and ultimately against bisexual orientation. Emotionally the lesbian community offers quality woman-to-woman relationships and a sense of empowerment. In therapy and counseling it is not uncommon to see a woman client who is questioning her sexual orientation. Once the female client is comfortable with her bisexual identity, if she is primarily affiliated with the lesbian community, therapists and counselors might help her to decide how she wants to identify herself. It is important to explore what each label means to her and how her self-esteem will be affected by choosing one label over another. (ABL)

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# Identifying as Lesbian vs. Bisexual: The Dilemma for Women

Sari H. Dworkin, Ph.D.

California State University -- Fresno

Department of Counseling and Special Education

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## Abstract

This paper explores the reasons why a bisexual woman strongly tied to the lesbian community may choose to identify as lesbian rather than bisexual or as bisexual rather than lesbian. This paper will cover: a brief discussion of labels including the concepts of essentialism and constructionism, the reasons for identifying as bisexual within the lesbian community, the reasons for identifying as lesbian rather than bisexual within the lesbian community and some implications for therapy.

Identifying as Lesbian vs. Bisexual: The Dilemma for Women

Self identity has three aspects, a self aspect (how we personally perceive ourselves), a presented aspect (how we present ourselves to others) and a perceived aspect (how others perceive us) (Troiden, 1989). These three aspects of self identity are not always congruent. A woman whose self aspect is one of bisexuality may present herself to others as bisexual, as lesbian, as hetersexual or as a combination, for example as a bisexual lesbian, and depending upon which community she is most publically active with, her percieved aspect may be that of bisexual, lesbian, or heterosexual. How does a bisexual woman decide how to identify herself? This paper will be concerned with the reasons why a bisexual woman strongly tied to the lesbian community may choose to identify as lesbian rather than bisexual or as bisexual rather than lesbian. This paper will cover: a brief discussion of labels including the concepts of essentialism and constructionism, the reasons for identifying as bisexual within the lesbian community, the reasons for identifying as lesbian rather than bisexual within the lesbian community and some implications for therapy.

Labels

In our culture a person's sexual identity falls into one of four groups: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and asexual (Golden, 1987) and a person's gender is either male or female (Matteson, 1991). Most people consider these catorgorizations as fixed and immutable but there are many who see these categories as human

inventions (Matteson, 1991). The catorgories differ not only from culture to culture but at different periods in time. Therefore, these labels are always available for scrutiny and always subject to change (Friedland & Highleyman, 1991). For instance, the Women's Movement or feminist movement caused women to scrutinize women's roles, women's rights, sexuality and the dynamics of power (Hutchins & Kaahumani, 1991). Many straight women came to love women as a result of feminism (Hutchins & Kaahumani, 1991) and for some of these women lesbianism became a political choice representing the ultimate solidarity between women (Golden, 1990) and for others bisexuality was the choice (Sheiner, 1991).

Labels can be helpful. To take on a particular label is to acknowledge publically an important aspect of self and to take pride in that aspect (Friedland & Highleyman, 1991). Labels help people find other people who identify with the same label and help create a community for solidarity and support (Friedland & Highleyman, 1991; Zinik, 1985). Some people make a statement by choosing one label and thereby avoiding other labels. Labels are used for political reasons, to ensure visiblity of a particular group (Sumpter, 1991) and/or to band together to fight oppression (Friedland & Highleyman, 1991).

Labels can also be harmful (Friedland & Highleyman, 1991). They can lead to dualistic and all or nothing thinking. Historically the world has been seen in terms of the dualities of mind and body with mind as superior, culture and nature with nature as superior and men and women with men as superior (Udis-Kessler, 1991).

Sexually, a person has been either heterosexual or homosexual with heterosexuality as superior. Dualistic thinking about sexual orientation posits sexual identity as fixid and static (Paul, 1985). This is known as essentialism. One is either fixed with a core identity/label as a heterosexual or fixed with a core identity/label as a homosexual (Udis-Kessler, 1991). This binary classification assumes that there are ways to detect which core identity/label one really has (Paul, 1985) and each of the communities associated with each of the core identities has strict norms which define who belongs and who doesn't belong to that community (Shuster, 1987). Bisexuality as a sexual identity questions this duality, this strict definition (Zinik, 1985).

In opposition to the essentialist view is the constructionist view of sexual identity. Constructionism posits that categories of human sexuality are constructed (Udis-Kessler, 1991) to meet the needs of a particular culture, society, and/or historical period. The category of homosexual and homosexuality came into being in 1869. Bisexuality as a category is often equated with constructionism. Bisexual implies flexibility, both/and thinking (Zinik, 1985). A bisexual freely chooses a dual sexual orientation (Zinik, 1985).

A woman with a bisexual label is seen as a threat to both the lesbian and heterosexual communities. The threat to the lesbian community has to do with the essentialist view prevalent within the gay/lesbian community and with the change that the gay label has undergone. The Gay Liberation Movement appropriated the gay label and changed it to mean a nonpathological sexual orientation (Paul,

1985). Originally this label represented the sexual liberation of all people and therefore homosexual exlusivity was not necessary. As Nichols (1988) has stated a gay label in fact means not totally heterosexual. But then gay became redefined as a disadvantaged minority with a community, culture, music, history, social and political organization (Paul, 1985). Along with this redefinition came a set critieria as to what it meant to be truly gay and have a healthy self-concept (Paul, 1985). Exclusive same-sex relationships was one of the defined criterion. Another defined criterion was that gay identity was immutable (Shuster, 1987). Bisexuality is a threat to heterosexuals because it brings heterosexuals closer to homosexuality (Udis-Kessler, 1991). Many lesbians have moved from a comfortable heterosexual lifestyle to a lesbian lifestyle and then to a bisexual lifestyle. Bisexuality advances the concept of sexual identity as being fluid and flexible (Sumpter, 1991). Some bisexuals identify as lesbian within the heterosexual community to ensure that the bisexual label isn't interpreted to minimize their lesbian side and identify as bisexual within the lesbian community in order to fight against biphobia (Matteson , 1991). Many bisexual women choose to identify proudly as bisexuals within the lesbian community.

To Identify as Bisexual

It is not easy to identify as bisexual within the lesbian community. Bisexual women fight myths about bisexuality within the lesbian as well as the heterosexual communities (Sumpter, 1991). According to Sumpter (1991) in the book Bi Any Other Name

one myth is that bisexuals are equally attracted to both sexes. This myth believed by many lesbian women causes them to fear that bisexual women will easily abandon the lesbian and/ or the feminist cause (Schneider, 1991). In actuality bisexual women usually favor either the same sex or the opposite sex while recognizing their attraction to both sexes. Therefore the bisexual woman within the lesbian community is likely to remain identified with the lesbian community. Another myth is that bisexuality doesn't exist at all (Udis-Kessler, 1991). Bisexual women are denying their lesbianism, failing to adjust to a lesbian identity in a heterosexist world (Sumpter, 1991; Zinik, 1991). Bisexuality is often seen as a transitional stage from heterosexuality to homosexuality (Paul, 1985, Queen, 1991). But as Golden (1987) has found in her research for many women lesbianism is the transitional stage to a bisexual identity. Most bisexual women consider themselves to be a part of the lesbian community. Some use the term bisexual lesbian in order to increase visibility on both issues (Sumpter, 1991). Bisexual lesbians threaten the belief that if you are lesbian than you have no heterosexual responsiveness (Zinik, 1991). They also threaten the reconstructed histories many lesbians have developed when remembering their prior heterosexual relationships. These reconstructed histories serve to confirm their immutable lesbian identity.

Bisexual women who openly identify as bisexual or as bisexual lesbians are not often welcome within the lesbian community. They are stigmatized and feel outside of the lesbian community (Golden,

1987; Shuster, 1987). The critical issues are again the essentialist belief mentioned earlier, and even more important the fact that they might sleep with men (Golden, 1987). Many self-identified lesbians believe that a woman who sleeps with a man has no right to call herself a lesbian (Yost, 1991). Bisexual women are seen as supporting male supremacy by identifying as bisexual and therefore are traitors to the lesbian community (Orlando, 1991). They are viewed as attempting to keep heterosexual privilege (Zinik, 1991). To claim a bisexual identity within the lesbian community is to risk isolating oneself from that community (Nichols, 1988).

Yet there are important reasons to identify as a bisexual or bisexual lesbian within the lesbian community. As previously mentioned many bisexual women considered themselves lesbians before they came out as bisexuals. Their partners are lesbian and bisexuals tend to affiliate with the community matching the gender of the partner, according to Fox (1991). They also understand lesbian and gay oppression and have learned the importance of visibility (Hutchins & Kaahumani, 1991). Bisexuals are not immune to anti-gay violence because they are seen primarily as lesbian by the heterosexual community even if they identify as bisexual within that community (Orlando, 1991). Bisexuals, as well as lesbians, challenge sexism by challenging gender roles and therefore suffer oppression (Shuster, 1991). Claiming a bisexual identity validates "previously disregarded, undeveloped or newly emerging sexual and affectional feelings and behavior" (Fox, 1991, p.31). Many bisexual women are willing to bond with men who are dealing with their

sexism but at the same time value and need the women only space found within the lesbian community (Johnson, 1991). They, thus, have the opportunity to negotiate both worlds and to fight for lesbian rights in both worlds. Elliott (1991) sees these women as bisocial and bicultural. Bisexual women are crucial to the reconciliation of desire with feminist consciousness as bisexual women embody the concept of the right to choose one's sexual partner regardless of gender (Schneider, 1991). Rather than abandoning the lesbian cause, bisexual lesbians will oppose the privileges given to non-lesbians and not given to lesbians (Schneider, 1991).

In summary, in spite of the discrimination experienced by bisexual women in the lesbian community, many choose to identify themselves as biseuxal within that community. This identification is a way to validate who they are, to increase visibility, to fight against the oppression of bisexuals as well as to fight against the oppression of lesbians and to fully actualize feminist principles.

To Identify as Lesbians

In her interviews at a women's college Golden (1987) found that some bisexual women choose to identify publically as lesbian within the lesbian community even though privately they consider themselves to be bisexual. Again referring back to labels and the perceived and presented aspects of self identity, Golden (1987) found differences between what she has labelled primary lesbians who feel they are born that way, elective lesbians who feel that their lesbian identity is chosen and political lesbians who consider

themselves bisexual (or exlusively heterosexual) but identify themselves as lesbian. One of the critical issues in terms of public identification tends to be acceptance. As stated previously bisexual women are not easily accepted within the lesbian community and therefore it is easier for some women who affiliate primarily with the lesbian community to identify as lesbian. There also is a good amount of societal pressure to identify one way or another, that is either as heterosexual or homosexual since many believe bisexuality doesn't exist (Nichols, 1988; Paul, 1985). Therefore again if a woman is connected more to the lesbian community she may identify as lesbian.

While one reason to identify as lesbian may be the need for acceptance and a sense of community, another reason may be political. The oppression that bisexual women face is the opppression against homosexuality (Hutchins & Kaahumani, 1991). As Udis-Kessler (1991) asserts in Bi Any Other Name, once homosexuality is less threatening, bisexuality will be confusing but no longer threatening. Orlando (1991) states: "By choosing gay identity we acknowledge that sexuality dominates our identity in a heterosexist world while recognizing that in a nonoppressive society no one would care who we wanted or who our sexual partners were, and sexuality would no longer be so central to our sense of who we are" (p. 230).

Another reason to identify as lesbian may be for quality emotional relationships. According to Nichols (1988) research suggests that both women and gay men find the emotional quality of

relationships with women more fulfilling than the emotional quality of relationships with men. Therefore bisexual women may desire these quality relationships with women, find them more easily within the lesbian community, and identify as lesbian in spite of their erotic attraction to men.

In addition to quality emotional relationships, some bisexual women find the lesbian label more empowering. It is the lesbian identity which breaks all of the gender role stereotypes and expectations. As Queen (1991) has stated: "It is the queer in me that empowers--that lets me see those lines and burn to cross them" (p. 20).

In summary the reasons that bisexual women may choose to identify as lesbian appear to be social, political, and emotional. Socially the lesbian identity offers a community to belong to, to be accepted in. Politically the lesbian identity is a way to continue the struggle against gay and lesbian oppresssion and ultimately against bisexual oppression. Emotionally the lesbian community offers quality woman to woman relationships and a sense of empowerment.

Implications for Therapy

In therapy it is not uncommon to see a woman client who is questionning her sexual orientation. She may state that she believes she is bisexual. It is important for us as therapists to examine our own biphobia; our beliefs that bisexuality doesn't exist, is a transitional stage to a lesbian identity. Sometimes our client's bisexuality does represent a struggle with accepting a lesbian identity but we cannot automatically assume this.

Once our female client is comfortable with her bisexual identity if she is primarily affiliated with the lesbian community we might need to help her decide how she wants to identify herself. It is important to explore what each label means to her, and how her self esteem will be affected by choosing one label versus another label. Bisexuality is similar to homosexuality in that there appears to be a coming out process. It is important to weigh the costs and benefits of each label. Her decision may be strongly tied to where she lives, the availability of a support system especially if she identifies as bisexual, and the assumptions of the lesbian community where she affiliates.

Finally we must not be invested in one decision over another. As we have seen there are valid reasons for both decisions. It is our client's choice and as sexual orientation may well be fluid and flexible how she labels herself also may be fluid and flexible.

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